

Student Perceptions on Pre-writing Processes: Challenges, Helpful Activities, and Noticing Seen Through Reflections

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Abstract

Foundations of Research Writing is a unique course that focuses on pre-writing processes of writing a research paper, compulsory for sophomore students at International Christian University who are low-intermediate in English proficiency. Reflection texts of 13 sophomore students written throughout this course have been obtained and analyzed to identify the aspects of pre-writing they find difficult in, to ascertain class activities helpful for them, and to unveil what they noticed through coursework. Through a qualitative analysis of students' reflections, students were found to perceive many of the pre-writing processes challenging. In addition, students' reflections revealed that they find collaborative pre-writing tasks, sharing of and getting feedback on their coursework, and explicit teaching of skills helpful. Finally, it was found that students have come to notice many things that synthesize their learning to date.

Foundations of Research Writing (FRW), is a compulsory sophomore course for Stream 4 students—the group of low-intermediate students—before they take a required research-paper writing course titled Research Writing (RW) in International Christian University (ICU). FRW “provides Stream 4 students with additional instruction and experience in research writing (English for Liberal Arts Program, 2017, p. 8)” and aims to “further supplement the academic writing covered in the first year of Stream 4 and provide a transition to RW” (p. 8).

FRW was created when the English Language Program (ELP) was reformed into the English for Liberal Arts program (ELA) in ICU in 2008 (English for Liberal Arts Program, 2017). After this reform, as a response to the widening range of students' English proficiency, freshman students started to be placed into four streams instead of three—Stream 1 being the highest and Stream 4 the lowest—mainly based on their TOEFL ITP scores at the beginning of their college study in April. Table 1 gives the overview of TOEFL ITP score range by stream.

Table 1
TOEFL ITP Score Range by Stream

Stream	Description	TOEFL ITP score ranges	Equivalent IELTS scores	Number of terms in ELA
1	Advanced	600 +	7.0 or above	2
2	High intermediate	550 ~ 600	5.5 ~ 6.5	3
3	Intermediate	450 ~ 550	4.0 ~ 5.5	4
4	Low intermediate	350 ~ 450	below 3.5	5

Note. Adapted from ELA Staff Handbook 2017

Student Perceptions on Pre-writing Processes

FRW primarily focuses on “the planning stage of the writing process of a research paper” (English for Liberal Arts Program, p. 8). Through three class meetings per week and tutorials over 10 weeks, it covers the following five aspects of pre-writing: “1) select and narrow a topic for a research paper, 2) do library and online research, 3) develop a thesis, 4) develop a formal outline, and 5) incorporate secondary source material into a research paper” (p. 8). Table 2 provides the overview of the course, described in terms of the focus, learning outcomes (LOs), and Application Exercises (AEs) by unit, written in the common syllabus in the academic year 2016.

Table 2
Overview of FRW

Unit	Focus	LOs	AEs
1	Select and narrow a topic for a research paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -to be able to describe what a research paper is -to be able to list some of the main characteristics of a research paper -to be able to explain the structure of a research paper -to be able to narrow down the broad topic 	Generate narrowed topics from a general topic.
2	Do library and online research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -to understand how to conduct library and online research -to practice using online databases -to be able to evaluate the trustworthiness of the sources 	Make a list of reliable sources on the narrowed topic generated in Unit 1, and explain the research process to the instructor in a tutorial.
3	Develop a thesis statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -to be able to define and explain the function(s) of a thesis statement -to be able to distinguish a strong/weak thesis statement -to know how to formulate a thesis statement 	Generate multiple thesis statements based on the sources collected in Unit 2.
4	Develop a formal outline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -to be able to create a blueprint (outline) of the paper by including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) the points students plan to make to support the thesis (claim) 2) the order these points will be placed -to be able to explain the conventions of formal outlining -to be able to evaluate an outline 	Create a formal outline based on the thesis statement created in Unit 3.
5	Avoid plagiarism / Incorporate secondary source materials into a research paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -to understand dos and don'ts about using sources -to be able to judge when to use a direct quote, paraphrase, or summary -to be able to paraphrase and summarize source material -to integrate information from multiple sources 	Paraphrase and summarize information from the sources collected in Unit 2.

In each unit, after LO explanation and comprehension check, discussion and practice activities take place to enhance deeper understanding and various skills related to writing and planning. At the end of each unit, students complete the AE described in Table 2, and they write reflections of each unit. Students' FRW grades are determined by the following criteria: attendance (20%), class work including homework and class participation (25%), reflection writing (3% x 5 units = 15%), and application exercises (8% x 5 units = 40%).

FRW is a standardized course with room for instructors to implement new ideas. Instructor meetings are held typically at the beginning and end of the semester. A common syllabus, suggested lesson plans, and student handouts are provided as well. Each instructor can use and customize lesson plans and handouts as needed.

Since I had been aware that students tend to find pre-writing processes as difficult as writing processes (Hatakeyama, 2009, 2014), the opportunity to teach FRW in 2016 provided me with the opportunity to elicit students' thoughts on various aspects of pre-writing. I hope to answer the following three research questions in this paper, aiming to support students more effectively in the future:

1. Where in the pre-writing processes do students find difficulty?
2. What activities helped students to improve their skills and understanding?
3. What have students noticed in each unit?

Review of Literature

Peer Interaction in a Writing Class

The importance of peer interaction in a language classroom to facilitate second language (L2) learning is acknowledged in many L2 acquisition theories. Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis provides a rationale that group work provides learners with more comprehensible input and encourages negotiations for meaning, which trigger cognitive process important for language learning. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory also endorses peer interaction since it plays a key role in cognitive development, especially of higher order cognitive functions including language learning. Influenced by Vygotsky's theory, Swain (2010) regards the importance of "languaging"—"using language to mediate the cognition" (p. 115)—and claims that it is the process that new knowledge or new understandings are constructed. Language teaching pedagogy mirrors the advancement of theories and research and uses group and pair work extensively to enhance language learning.

Writing pedagogy is no exception. In writing classes, activities requiring peer interaction such as peer review and collaborative writing—"the co-authoring of a text by two or more writers" (Storch, 2013, p. 2) are often used. These activities involving peer interaction is said to be especially helpful for novice writers who tend to produce writer-based texts; this is because the assumption that readers will understand the intended meaning of writers is often challenged through interaction (Flower, 1979, cited in Storch, 2013). Moreover, "collaborative writing encourages writers to share ideas about good composing strategies" (Daiute 1986, cited in Storch, 2013, p. 24) and promotes writers to express and reflect on thinking "that might otherwise remain unexamined or unelaborated" (Daiute & Dalton, 1993, cited in Storch, 2013, p. 24). In short, peer interaction in a writing class seems to have many benefits, especially for novice writers.

Pre-writing Processes

The importance of pre-writing processes has been emphasized in many how-to books on writing. Silvia (2007) states, "Planning is part of writing, so people who write a lot also plan a

lot” (p. 30) and explains the benefit of outlining: “Writing an outline lets you make early decisions about your paper” (p. 79). Warburton (2007) echoes the importance of planning: “Think of the plan as part of the writing, though, not as something separate from the writing process. What begins as vague and unfocused gradually emerges as sharp and clear” (pp. 8-9). He adds, “Often it is only when you begin to plan your essay that you discover what you really need to know” (p. 35).

One insight obtained from research on pre-writing is that novice writers do not spend sufficient time on planning (Flower & Hayes, 1981), which leads to the suggestion of using pre-writing activities including group brainstorming (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). From a pedagogical perspective, Leopold (2012) suggests using various pre-writing tasks that fit students of different learning styles: auditory learners, visual learners, and kinesthetic learners. More recently, Neumann and McDonough (2015) investigated the relationship between pre-writing discussions (i.e., collaborative pre-writing tasks) and students’ written text in an English for Academic Purposes class. Students perceived pre-writing discussions positively especially in terms of generating and evaluating ideas. Yet, the effectiveness of collaborative pre-writing tasks examined in terms of the relationship between pre-writing discussions and students’ written text has not been fully confirmed.

Reflection

Reflections can be defined as “pieces of writing that require students to articulate and review the process and/or products of their portfolio components” (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005, p. 303). Recently, reflections have been regarded as one of effective ways to foster learner autonomy—“the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”—and are often used as part of portfolio (Holec, 1981, cited in Little, 2007, p. 15). In fact, portfolio assessment is regarded as an effective way to promote invisible learning outcomes which are “essential for the development of language competence and motivation.” (Kohonen, 2002, p. 1).

Given the importance, efforts have been made to guide students to write critical reflections. Kohonen (2002) discusses the importance of justifying “the rationale and benefits of reflection to the students” (p. 3). Fernsten and Fernsten (2005) provide three guidelines to make the reflective process more effective: a) “creation of a safe and supportive environment” (p. 304); b) “development and design of adequate and strategic prompts” (p. 305); and c) “development or mutual understanding of a shared discourse” (p. 306). Jenson (2011) reports that student surveys, focused in-class discussions, and e-Portfolio contributed to reflections of longer texts and of deeper content. They all seem to underscore the importance of carefully designing reflection prompts, preparing students to write, and creating a comfortable atmosphere to help students write meaningful reflections.

Methods

Participants

Out of 17 students in my FRW class in 2016 spring, two students whom I was going to teach RW in the following term were excluded and the remaining 15 students were asked—by an e-mail with a link to Google Forms—whether they would participate in my research. It was explained that to participate in my research meant that they would allow me to use their reflections they had already completed and submitted and that there would be no additional favor asked on them. As a result, 13 sophomores (4 male and 9 female) agreed to participate in this research. The procedure and research design was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of ICU on September 30th, 2016.

Data Collection

The materials used for this research are reflections of 13 students written as course assignments. The total number of reflections collected turned out to be 61. Students' names and IDs were deleted from reflections, and reflections were sorted by units. In this way, students' reflection texts by unit were compiled.

Data Analysis

Students' reflections by unit were manually coded into three aspects: 1) challenging aspects of the unit, 2) helpful class activities and skills, and 3) students' noticing. Then, under each aspect, students' comments were sorted into a frequency table by content. On a related note, since students wrote their reflections as course assignments, their reflections were in English, which had some grammatical errors. In this paper, when students' words are quoted, grammatical errors are not corrected in principle, and only major errors were corrected using square brackets in order to directly deliver students' thoughts as much as possible.

Results

Unit 1: Select and Narrow a Topic for a Research Paper

Challenging aspects As many as ten students state that narrowing down the topic is challenging. One student describes how she struggled in the past: "I am not good at narrowing topic, which resulted in my low ARW grade. That is, it takes much time to decide my topic, and I would be behind by other classmates, and then it takes a lot of time to write because topic is not narrowed, and finally I would turn it in late."

Table 3 shows the reasons why students find narrowing the topic to be difficult. They seem to be aware that to narrow the topic successfully, they need to have background knowledge and there should be sufficient number of sources.

Table 3

Reasons Students Find Narrowing the Topic Difficult.

Reasons	Number of students
Anxieties about finding English sources on the topic	3
Necessity to look into the topic deeply	1
Not having enough knowledge about the topic	1
Anxieties about whether the topic is academic or not	1

Helpful class activities and skills Group brainstorming on sample general topics seems helpful. One student writes, "Actually, I had thought brainstorming is not important, but I realized it is very useful, and I easily become able to hit on some idea and detail about topic through doing brainstorming and discuss some topics in class." Another student points out the benefit of getting new ideas from classmates. Some students tried mind mapping—one of the brainstorming techniques they learned, and one student reports, "By writing some keywords, I could find relationship between them and come up with a new idea which is another perspective. It is really a useful skill."

Other students acknowledge the benefits of sharing their narrowed topics in groups. A student describes how it worked: "Because of [sharing of topics], my rough ideas about the topic could get into more specific focuses." For another student, "Other students' thinking and

ways to focus their topics were very valuable because we did not have opportunities to see other's idea mapping." Students' comments are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Helpful Activities and Skills in Unit 1

Helpful activities / skills	Number of students
Sharing of narrowed topics and the narrowing processes	4
Group brainstorming and discussions in narrowing down sample general topics	3
Drawing mind maps individually for their own topic	3

Students' noticing Students' noticing is wide-ranging, which is shown in Table 5. Many point out how essential it is to have basic knowledge on the topic and how useful brainstorming and mind-mapping are. One student writes: "when we do brainstorming or mapping, if we do not have enough knowledge, we would not be able to [do well]." Some students have realized through class activities and tutorials that their topics were not narrowed enough.

Some students point out the connection between the narrowing the topics and other pre-writing stages such as finding sources and creating outlines. One student writes, "I noticed that deciding closed topic without searching the sources sometimes makes it difficult to find enough sources especially when the topic has not attracted attention in foreign countries and when it is hard to find the sources written in English." Another student writes, "I will be able to use these outcomes when I plan my outline because these strategies such as how to narrow topics are cores of research paper's structure." Another student writes, "It was the most difficult for me to decide my thesis statement. I [now] understand that one of the reasons is that my topic was not so narrowed then."

Table 5

Students' Noticing in Unit 1

What students noticed	Number of students
Necessity of basic knowledge on the topic	3
Importance of brainstorming/mind-mapping	3
Their topics being still a little too broad	2
Importance of planning as foundation of writing	1
Importance of checking the availability of sources	1
Connection between narrowed topics and thesis statements	1
Applicability of mind-maps to creating outlines	1

Unit 2: Do Library and Online Research

Challenging aspects Two students see difficulty in finding sufficient sources in English for different reasons: shortage of English sources and lack of knowledge on the topic. Some students reveal their lack of confidence in MLA citation. Other students show their concerns about using databases; students were not confident about the differences among databases, nor were they skilled in effectively combining keywords. Two students find it difficult to evaluate sources. Table 6 gives a summary.

Student Perceptions on Pre-writing Processes

Table 6
Challenging Aspects of Unit 2

Challenging aspects	Number of students
Finding sources	2
MLA citation	2
Library research (including how to use databases)	2
Evaluating sources	2

Helpful class activities and skills Four students feel that classmates' demonstration of how to find sources using databases and search engines were helpful. One student describes, "This is a good opportunity for me to know various ways how to look for sources." Two students feel that knowing the criteria for evaluating the sources were helpful. One student writes, "I found some new way to evaluate the source through this FRW class. For example, we need to consider not only the author but also the publisher in the case of Websites." Two students find it useful to know some functions of Google Scholar. In fact, one student refers to its "cited-by" function and wrote, "I learned that there was an effective way to find the sources in Google scholar; which are like 'snowballing'." Table 7 shows the summary.

Table 7
Helpful Activities and Skills in Unit 2

Helpful activities / skills	Number of students
Demonstration of finding sources by peers	4
Criteria for evaluating sources	2
Google Scholar functions	2

Students' noticing Two students comment on the importance of reading or skimming sources to obtain information on their topic. Further, one student points out, "I realized that the topic and what I want to know have to be well-defined enough, in order to conduct effective research." Another student writes about the use of multiple databases: "I usually use only ICU library database, but I have noticed that I should use other databases too, depending on what I require in searching." Lastly, one student mentions, "I realized that finding sources and evaluating them are the important process in writing research paper because the quality of the research paper depends on how reliable or not sources are." Table 8 shows what students noticed in Unit 2.

Table 8
Students' Noticing in Unit 2

What students noticed	Number of students
Importance of reading/skimming sources	2
Importance of a well-defined topic for effective search of sources	1
Use of various databases depending on different purposes	1
Importance of finding reliable sources for writing a research paper	1

Unit 3: Develop a Thesis Statement

Challenging aspects Regarding the challenging aspects of Unit 3, four students write that writing a thesis statement itself is difficult (See Table 9). One student indicates that it is difficult to come up with "the supporting parts" of the thesis statement, and another student attributes the difficulty to the inability to "focus on" the topic and "write deeply." Two students find it difficult to evaluate the thesis statement by themselves.

Student Perceptions on Pre-writing Processes

Table 9

Challenging Aspects in Unit 3

Challenging aspects	Number of students
Writing a thesis statement	4
Evaluating the thesis statement by themselves	2

Helpful class activities and skills Three students find collaborative revisions of sample thesis statements useful. Students revised, “discussed, and shared a thesis statement,” which helped them to “understand a good thesis statement”. According to one student, “sample revisions were helpful for me when I think about [my] own thesis statement.” Two students find peer review and advice from classmates to be helpful. A student noticed the lack of claim in his/her thesis statement “thanks to the advice of group members” and found it a good opportunity “because it is hard to find the own fault by myself.” Another student comments on the effectiveness of peer review from a different perspective: “I thought that my knowledge would be developing by comparing what I wrote with other students in class.” Table 10 gives a summary.

Table 10

Helpful Activities and Skills in Unit 3

Helpful activities / skills	Number of students
Collaborative revisions of sample thesis statements	3
Peer review / Advice from peers	2

Students’ noticing Students’ noticing include the importance of having a clear claim (3 students), the necessity to avoid sweeping and judgmental words (2 students), and the necessity to include a narrowed topic, a claim, and supporting points (1 student). As one student writes, it seems that students “learned about thesis statements more deeply” and thus “became more conscious of what a thesis statement should be like.”

There was further noticing. Two students comment that the clarity of thesis statements helps readers’ understanding. Another student notices the importance of having background knowledge and a narrowed topic: “I had some knowledge of my topic, and I had already made a narrowed topic. . . . I could write my thesis statement easier than when I had no idea and narrowed topic.” Two students notice the relationship between thesis statements and outlines. Indeed, “a thesis statement sometimes indicates the outline of the essay. . . . [This] helps not only the readers but also the writer because the thesis statement reminds the author [of] what he/she planned. Students’ noticing is summarized in Table 11 below.

Table 11

Students’ Noticing in Unit 3

What students noticed	Number of students
Necessity to state the author’s position clearly in a thesis statement	3
Necessity to avoid sweeping and judgmental words in a thesis statement	2
Relationship between a thesis statement and an outline	2
Relationship between readers’ understanding and the clarity of a thesis	2
Necessity to include a narrowed topic, a claim and supporting points	1
Importance of having a narrowed topic to write a thesis statement	1
Difficulty of writing a thesis statement compared to understanding it	1

Unit 4: Develop a Formal Outline

Challenging aspects Students generally find writing detailed outlines to be difficult, and many students explain the reasons for it. One student “could not deepen from big headings to smallest headings.” For another student, “to make a formal outline before starting to write was hard work.” Table 12 gives a summary.

Table 12

Challenging Aspects in Unit 4

Challenging aspects	Number of students
Writing the details of the outline	2
Creating the outline itself	2
Creating the outline before starting to write	1
Not being sure whether the balance among paragraphs is appropriate	1
Coming up with a nice hook and introduction	1

Helpful class activities and skills Students generally find sharing of their outlines in groups and explicit learning of how to write an outline helpful. Three students comment on sharing in groups, which illustrates what and how they learned from peers. One student reflects, “It was very useful to compare with other students’ outlines because I could notice what was not enough in my outline.” Another student states, “I re-learned how to divide contents by classmates’ outlines. Their outlines were so interesting to me. I could learn how to make interesting headings, contents, and the way to attract readers by their outlines.” These comments endorse the effectiveness of seeing peers’ outlines for learning and noticing at least for some students.

Three students find learning how to write a detailed outline to be useful. Some find knowing the hierarchy of headings to be helpful, as one student writes, “I have written outlines just as a memorization tool that shows what I want to write without showing its section and hierarchy, so the learning of this section was so useful.” Table 13 gives a summary.

Table 13

Helpful Activities and Skills in Unit 4

Helpful activities / skills	Number of students
Sharing of outlines in groups	3
Learning how to create an outline using smaller and smallest headings	3
Analysis of sample outlines	1

Students’ noticing Many students notice that creating an outline helps them organize and clarify their ideas and paper structure. One student explains, “I thought an outline is just like a memo. However, my thinking was changed through this unit. To make an outline is quite effective to organize my mind and essay.” Another student points out that creating an outline helps make a paper coherent: “Making an outline can be the solution of coherence problems. For me, coherence is one of the biggest problem. Last year, my essay was lack of coherence. . . . Thus, coherence is one of my goals when I write a research paper. To make an outline is an effective way to think about my topic and coherence.”

By creating outlines, some notice what needs to be done to make their paper better. Seen from a different perspective, one student reflects on the amount of work accomplished by creating an outline: “I somehow felt that my essay had suddenly progressed by making an outline.” Table 14 shows the summary.

Table 14

Students' Noticing in Unit 4

What students noticed	Number of students
Effectiveness of outlines in terms of organizing ideas and structures	7
Necessity to brush up one's own outline more	3
The usefulness of a scratch outline before writing a detailed outline	1
Importance of paying attention to forms	1
Progress made by writing an outline	1
Relationship between the quality of a research paper and an outline	1

Unit 5: Avoid Plagiarism / Incorporate Secondary Source Materials into a Research Paper

Challenging aspects Students may feel relatively comfortable about the content of this unit through their learning as freshmen. One student writes, "paraphrasing and summarizing are still hard" and another student states that it was difficult to judge appropriate ways to cite sources. Table 15 shows the summary.

Table 15

Challenging Aspects in Unit 5

Challenging aspects	Number of students
Paraphrasing and summarizing	1
Judging when to use a direct quote, a paraphrase or a summary	1

Helpful class activities and skills What students find helpful is twofold: (1) learning different reporting verbs appropriate for different situations and (2) learning different ways of citing sources and when to use each. As for different reporting verbs, one student writes: "For me, it is difficult to understand English nuance, but I could use appropriate verbs when I see [the list of reporting verbs in the writing reference book]. I would like to use this skill when I write my research paper." In terms of different ways of citing sources, another student writes, "It was very helpful for me to be taught when we should use direct quotes." Table 16 gives a summary.

Table 16

Helpful Activities and Useful Skills in Unit 5

Helpful activities / skills	Number of students
Learning when to quote, paraphrase, and summarize	4
Learning various verbs to cite sources	3

Students' noticing Students' noticing in this unit is varied and yet related. Seeing the importance of paraphrasing, some students realize the inadequacy of their paraphrases and thus find it necessary to improve their paraphrasing skill. In terms of direct quotes, one student realizes the power of direct quotes if used effectively and selectively.

In addition, reviewing the entire course, some students comment on the importance of the planning stage of writing. One student writes, "I realize now that planning process such as making an outline which includes secondary sources are as important as writing stage." Table 16 gives a summary.

Student Perceptions on Pre-writing Processes

Table 16
Students' Noticing in Unit 5

What students noticed	Number of students
Necessity to improve paraphrasing skill	2
Importance of paraphrasing as a way to make the paper original	1
The risk of changing the meaning in paraphrasing	1
Necessity to clearly indicate the original in citing indirect sources	1
The power direct quotes have	1
Importance of appropriately choosing how to cite sources	1
Importance of the planning stage of writing	1
Usefulness of FRW	1

Discussion

From the analysis of students' reflections, it seems that students find most of the pre-writing processes, such as narrowing the topic, finding and evaluating sources, writing and evaluating a thesis statement, and creating a detailed outline, to be difficult. This seems to echo the words of my previous students who expressed that narrowing the topic and finding sources are difficult (Hatakeyama, 2009, 2014) and lends support to the points Silvia (2007) and Warbarton (2007) made with regard to the importance of planning. Further, this confirms Ferris and Hedgecock's (2005) suggestion of using pre-writing activities to make sure novice writers spend enough time on planning.

As for helpful pre-writing activities, first, students find collaborative pre-writing tasks such as narrowing sample topics in groups and collaboratively revising sample thesis statements helpful. In these tasks, students had many interaction opportunities in which they were exposed to their peers' writing strategies as Daiute (1986, cited in Storch, 2013) maintains. Second, it seems that to share and present their AEs are also helpful for them since they can get feedback from peers, get ideas from their classmates including how they approached the assignment, and notice what is lacking in their work by verbalizing it. These reflections endorse Daiute and Dalton (1993, cited in Storch, 2013) and Daiute (1986, cited in Storch, 2013). Last but not least, students seem to find explicit teaching or reviewing to be helpful. Although many of the content of this course may be what students already learned as freshmen, students seemed to positively regard the whole experience of refreshing their memory, clarifying questions they had, and deepening their understanding through interaction and practice opportunities.

In terms of students' noticing, what is characteristic is that students not only write about what they noticed in each unit but also start to synthesize what they learned. Some students comment on the relationship between narrowing the topic and finding sources as well as between thesis statements and outlines. Others connect their learning in FRW with their previous writing experiences. Some note the importance of pre-writing process as something as important as writing itself. The coursework might have triggered them to notice things that are new, deeper, and synthesized.

Finally, the quality of reflections written by students is noteworthy. They have produced critical reflections by realizing something new, giving deeper insights, and by synthesizing their learning experiences. The fact that Stream 4 students have learned and practiced how to write reflections as freshmen and that they have continued to write reflections throughout their freshman year for a compulsory course may have contributed to the quality of reflections they produced. Through concerted efforts of the program, teachers, and students, FRW students' reflections have thus become a rich resource for research.

Conclusion

Through a qualitative analysis of reflections, it was found that students perceive many of the pre-writing processes challenging. Students' reflections also revealed that they find collaborative pre-writing tasks, sharing of and getting feedback on their coursework, and explicit teaching of content to be helpful. Finally, students seem to have come to notice things that synthesize their learning to date by devoting one semester to pre-writing processes of writing a research paper.

In a typical writing class, time spent on pre-writing tasks tends to be limited possibly due to time shortage. Yet, this small-scale study shows that revisiting certain aspects of pre-writing processes, through collaborative activities for example, may benefit students in many ways: helping students overcome obstacles in writing papers and leading them to new noticing. As such, what has been taught and done in FRW classes may well be incorporated, if only partially, in other writing classes and contexts.

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